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PROGRAM Nightwatch

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SUBJECT Nazi War Criminals

FELICIA JETER: The search continues for hundreds of Nazi war criminals and collaborators believed living in this country. The OSI, the Office of Special Investigations of the Justice Department, is now working on a case that could have startling implications. The State Department may have illegally brought ex-Nazis into the United States during the height of the Cold War.

Recently, Mary Jo West spoke about that possibility with John Loftus, who spent two years as an OSI prosecutor.

MARY JO WEST: How widespread was this problem in postwar America, with Nazis living in our country?

JOHN LOFTUS: The group that I studied, there was systematic recruitment of the entire Nazi puppet government of one occupied country, Byelorussia. And I went through the classified files, there were traces of similar recruitment programs for virtually every organization of collaborators behind the Iron Curtain.

WEST: Who or, namely, what department was responsible for their being here?

LOFTUS: The State Department. It had its own covert agency, the rival of the CIA. It was called the Office of Policy Coordination. Very few people have ever heard of it. But between 1948 and 1952, they had virtual carte blanche for recruiting intelligence assets to fight the Communists.

WEST: Who headed the agency, and what were they really after?

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LOFTUS: Allen Dulles and Frank Wisner were the two people that were the primary forces behind this unit. And they wanted to establish a secret network of commandos, guerrilla warriors behind the Iron Curtain to liberate those countries that had recently come under Communist domination. Their program were to use the same Nazi intelligence agents that had fought in these countries during World War II. Unfortunately, many of these intelligence agents were also the people most directly responsible for the worst atrocities of the Holocaust.

Tragically, after the war, many of these Nazi collaborators worked for anyone who would pay them, including the Communists. And that's why our intelligence operations were an unmitigated disaster.

WEST: Who knew about this? How high up did this go?

LOFTUS: I saw some classified documents that suggested that during the Eisenhower Administration, there were people at the level of Nelson Rockefeller and Vice President Richard Nixon who were cognizant. President Truman and President Roosevelt were totally ignorant. Truman -- both Presidents had given strict orders that Nazi quislings, traitors, and war criminals were not to be used as intelligence assets. And those orders were disobeyed.

Let's jump to the present for a moment. President Carter set up the Office of Special Investigations. Tell us about that and bring us up to date.

LOFTUS: There are about 20 trial attorneys in the Justice Department. Our job was to find Nazis living in America, take away their citizenship, and deport them, get the Nazis out. In the course of doing that, I did a special investigative program where I went through the vaults of the American intelligence community, and some of them hadn't been open in 30 years, and found there the files that showed how these people were recruited and brought into the United States.

WEST: Getting back to the earlier questions about who knew. Why was it kept secret and how did it eventually come out?

LOFTUS: You have to know the context of the times. The CIA was an infant organization. Most of the people in it were people who had helped prosecute Nazis at Nuremberg. They were to be kept in utter ignorance. So was President Truman.

At the other end of the political spectrum were people in the State Department that saw the Communists as the major enemy. World War II was over, the Nazis were beaten, and anything was fair play as long as it stopped the Communists.

And many of these men thought that Truman would be defeated by President Dewey in 1948. And so, anticipating a change of policy, they committed mutiny. They recruited Nazis, put them on the payroll, and brought them to the United States, in defiance of congressional prohibitions.

WEST: Let's be honest. Does the average Mr. Joe Smith who lives next door care that a former Nazi is living next door to him, as long as he keeps his grass mowed? What are you finding out?

LOFTUS: No, I don't think so. I think there are concerned citizens. I think even the Jewish community, the survivors are too weary to fight much anymore, and the rest are too indifferent. And that's a tragedy, because we have a very limited period of time, perhaps ten years, before the last Nazi war criminal dies a citizen of the United States. If we are to do something to set the historical precedent, we've got to do it quick. There isn't a lot of time left.

I hope that when the last Nazi war criminal is on his deathbed, there's someone from the Justice Department there trying to take his citizenship away. We didn't fight World War II to make this country a rest home for Nazis, and I think we have a very brief period of time so we can teach the next generation that men who kill children will be hunted for the rest of their lives.

WEST: Are you optimistic, Mr. Loftus, that Congress will do something about this?

LOFTUS: No, I'm a cynic. I think World War II is long ago and far away. And there are some issues of moral justice that aren't sexy, in terms of getting votes.

WEST: Why do you think that? Elaborate some more.

LOFTUS: I think Americans, traditionally, don't care much about foreign policy, and care very little about Eastern European foreign policy. And sad to say, that the idea of Klaus Barbie killing French citizens is more appalling to us than the Nazi collaborators living among us that were responsible for the murder of tens of thousands of human beings. I wonder sometimes if it was that Barbie killed Frenchmen and not Jews.

WEST: Do you sometimes feel you're the only person in America carrying around this banner? Do you feel alone?

LOFTUS: I don't see myself as a crusader. I...

WEST: You've written a book. You've been on 60 Minutes. You know, you've gotten a lot of press.

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LOFTUS: I think that one of the few good things to come out of all this is going to be education. We're going to teach the next generation about moral values and about -- that there are some crimes that will never be forgiven.

WEST: Okay. Let's talk about that in just a moment.

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WEST: Mr. Loftus, describe these people who are now living in our country. What kind of crimes did they do?

LOFTUS: Stanislaw Stankevich (?) was mayor of a city. He took 7000 Jews and arranged for their execution in a single day. He had his police dig pits on the outside of towns and have the Jews climb into the pits in double layers, had to tell us that he could shoot through them and save ammunition. A layer of dirt was shoveled over the wounded. Another double layer of bodies, another layer of dirt.

The worst part of the atrocities wasn't discovered until after the war, when American Red Cross officials and Soviet doctors could find no bullet wounds on the children. Apparently to save the price of a bullet, they simply buried the babies alive.

Here was a guy that was wanted at Nuremberg, denounced in the United Nations, vilified on the floor of Congress, and the State Department put him in charge of a refugee camp and brought him to the United States, gave him a job as a broadcaster with Radio Liberty. And he died in this country a citizen of the United States in the New York area.

WEST: How much of your personal time was spent tracking down Stankevich, and was it frustrating when he eventually died?

LOFTUS: Oh, I spent two years preparing the Stankevich case for trial. We had everything, his handwritten confessions to his Nazi activities. And two weeks before we could bring him to trial, I got a telegram from my Soviet counterpart in the Procurator's office in Moscow, and he said that Stanislaw Stankevich had just dropped dead.

WEST: What did you feel like when you found that out?

LOFTUS: Defeated. That was our one chance of bringing out in a trial the whole tragic history of this smuggling operation. And when Stankevich died, I knew I couldn't spend another two years in the vaults and try and find another character like that and bring it forward. So I asked the CIA and the Pentagon and the Justice Department if I could write a secret

history of it. And they declassified the Belaris (?) secret. And that's how the book came to be published.

WEST: You don't think there are more Stankevich's out there?

LOFTUS: Many more.

WEST: So, why aren't you pursuing them?

LOFTUS: I think it did more good to have someone who had access to the files come forward and say, "This is what's down there." The only way that this investigation will proceed, I believe, is for Congress to get involved, for them to demand that these files be taken out of the vaults and put on the public record.

WEST: What do you think is going to happen to Barbie?

LOFTUS: I think that his trial will be postponed for a year. And for reasons of health, his sentence will be commuted after sufficient time has died down. Barbie knows an awful lot. He can embarrass French politicians, British and American officials, West German intelligence agencies. The man knows a great deal.

WEST: Can Barbie ultimately help you in what you've been trying to do?

LOFTUS: Oh, I think so. I think Klaus Barbie was recruited in exactly the same fashion I described in "The Belaris Secret." We gave him his false identity documents, put him on the payroll at a very, very large salary, lied to the French about his whereabouts, and ultimately aided him in escaping to South America. It's just one more example of the kinds of amoral intelligence operations we conducted during the late '40s.

WEST: This search that you've been doing. I wouldn't say that you were obsessed with the subject, necessarily, but what has it done to you personally or to your family? Do you feel like, though, you have been out there by yourself?

LOFTUS: It's been very, very lonely. My wife and I talked about this beforehand and before we decided to go public. And we knew that if we did, there would be certain costs. But I think that we both decided that this was too important to stay secret, that we had to do something.

I'll be glad when it's all over and it's behind me. So will my family. But there was so little time left and it was one thing that we could do.

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WEST: Thank you very much for being with us this morning on Nightwatch.